

## Recognizing Cause and Effect

### **from “Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree” by Susan Freinkel**

To celebrate Arbor Day yesterday, President Bush added a new tree to the White House grounds—an American chestnut. At first glance it may seem an odd choice, since chestnuts have been largely absent from the American landscape for more than half a century. Yet if any species can help us see the importance of trees to humanity, it is the American chestnut, and its story makes it the perfect emblem for Arbor Day.

Chestnuts were once so plentiful along the East Coast that according to legend a squirrel could travel the chestnut canopy from Georgia to Maine without ever touching the ground. The trees grew tall, fast and straight. Many considered it the perfect tree: It produced nourishing food and a rot-resistant wood that was used for everything from furniture to fence posts....

Then in the early 20th century a deadly fungus imported from Japan hit American forests. Within 40 years this fast and merciless fungus spread over some 200 million acres and killed nearly four billion trees. The blight brought the chestnut to the brink of extinction. Even today, new sprouts continue to shoot up from the roots of seemingly dead trees only to be attacked again by the fungus before they can flower and reproduce....

The American Chestnut Foundation has been patiently interbreeding the American chestnuts with its blight-resistant Asian cousins to come up with a hybrid that looks like an American chestnut, but fights the fungus Asian-style. The foundation says it hopes to have its first crop of blight-resistant nuts ready by next year for trial planting in forests. The White House chestnut tree is one of these hybrids....

There are good economic and environmental reasons for bringing back the chestnut: It's a fast-growing source of good timber, a boon for wildlife, and an efficient way to draw carbon and pollutants out of the atmosphere. But many of the people I have met would save the chestnut simply for its own sake, as a welcome companion.